

## **Accomplishments of the Alabama System of Care resulting from the RC Consent Decree**

### **I. General**

- All 67 counties have developed a system of care consistent with the principals of best child welfare practice. These principles include:
  - Children should live with their families when they can do so safely.
  - Comprehensive services are provided to children and their families.
  - Family planning meetings are held at necessary intervals to determine the appropriate services for the child and family and the overall plan for the child, which can be reunification with the family, placement with a relative, or adoption.
  - Reports of child abuse and neglect are quickly investigated to insure that children are protected.
  - Utilizing deadline set forth in the federal law known as the Adoptions and Safe Families Act, DHR works to quickly place children in their permanent home, whether that is back with their biological families or in an adoptive home.
- The Governor is establishing a Child Welfare Commission to provide guidance to the child welfare system for the next 18 months.

### **II. CANs/Safety**

- DHR established new policy during the R.C. case regarding how quickly an abused child had to be seen after a report was made to the Department. When cases of abused or neglected children are reported to DHR, over 93% of those children are seen by a social worker within 5 days. If there is a report of imminent danger to the child, a social worker is sent out immediately to investigate to insure the child is safe while the allegations are being investigated.
- DHR eliminated a substantial backlog of uncompleted Child Abuse and Neglect Reports to help ensure child safety.
- When DHR intervenes in a family's life, children are not subjected to repeated abuse. Over 98% of the children who are the subject of an abuse or neglect report had no prior report of maltreatment within the past 12 months. The federal government sets a standard of 94%, which DHR well exceeds.
- Local community committees were established consisting of personnel from DHR, law enforcement, mental health, juvenile courts, and child advocacy centers to address the needs of abused and neglected children and those in foster care. The reviews by these multi-disciplinary teams are in addition to the case reviews completed by the Quality Assurance committees.

### **III. Children in Their Own Home**

- DHR serves more children in their own homes than ever before.
- County DHR offices have funds available to meet the needs of children in foster care and in protective services caseloads. These funds can be used for traditional services such as counseling or for other less common things such as band instruments and senior class rings.
- A wide array of services exist that DHR uses to keep children safe while living in their own homes. These services include individual and family counseling, behavioral aides, home makers, day care, tutoring, substance abuse treatment, intensive family preservation services, and many others. Many of these services are provided to the families in their own homes.

### **IV. Foster Care**

- A review of the circumstances of children in foster care shows that the lives of the children and their families improved in 96% of the cases.
- Families maintain contact with their children who come into foster care. Visits are scheduled on a regular basis and phone calls and letters are encouraged. Siblings who are in different placements visit frequently with each other.
- The number of days a child stays in foster care has decreased with children returning home faster than in the past.
- Children are placed in the most appropriate and least restrictive placement that will meet their needs. These placements range from traditional foster homes, therapeutic foster homes, group homes, residential treatment centers and psychiatric hospitals. Over 77% of the children in foster care are living in a home setting. 19% are in group homes or in a residential treatment facility and only one-fifth of one percent are in psychiatric hospitals for short term evaluation and treatment.
- DHR developed a system to support foster families to prevent placement disruptions. 93% of foster children in Alabama experience three or fewer moves while in foster care, which is higher than the national standard of 87%.
- Children are placed in foster homes in or near their own county, which allows frequent visits with parents, siblings, and other relatives.
- The number of children who return to foster care after having been reunited with their families has been reduced.

- Foster and adoptive parents must attend an intensive 10-week program before a foster child or adoptive child is placed in their home.
- Families are now part of the decision making process through their participation in family planning meetings.
- Social workers advocate for families of children in foster care to receive appropriate educational opportunities in the local school systems. Workers attend meetings with teachers and school officials to plan curriculums for children.

## **V. Improvements to the Department**

- DHR increased the amount of federal funds that it receives to help serve foster children and their families.
- Prior to R.C., curriculum did not exist to train social workers. DHR now has a curriculum for all new social workers and advanced training for more experienced social workers on subjects including dealing with substance abuse and the sexual abuse of children.
- To increase the professionalism of the social worker staff, DHR established a social worker classification that requires a Bachelors of Social Work degree and licensure within 1 year of employment. A new classification of Senior Social Worker was also created for employees who have a Masters of Social Work degree with the same licensure requirement. The State Office of DHR has a recruitment and retention program and a specialized recruiter in place in Jefferson County, the largest county office. Intensive recruitment efforts are used to hire BSW and MSW graduates.
- DHR has raised its entry level pay for recruits with field placement experience within the Department and has raised its starting salary for social workers in the largest urban areas to recruit and retain social workers.
- Caseload standards for social workers are among the lowest in the nation. Abuse investigators, on average, receive 10 cases per month. Workers for foster children and those children still in their own homes carry 18 cases. Adoptive workers carry 22 cases and resource workers have 40.

## **VI. Maintaining the Reforms**

- There are local Quality Assurance committees in every county that review cases and report their findings to the county director. These committees consist of educators, foster parents, counselors, law enforcement, attorneys, and other community leaders.

- A Quality Assurance unit at the DHR state office reviews every county's child welfare program at least once every three years.
- A monitoring system was established that grades each county's performance in the critical areas of safety and how quickly children are placed in permanent homes. A report card on each county's performance is published twice a year on the internet.
- The caseloads of the workers are monitored each month by county directors and by the DHR personnel director, family services administrators, and other state office personnel. Reports on the caseloads of every social worker and the overall workload of each county are generated and reviewed each month to insure that caseloads remain within the standards.
- A team of child welfare experts was established in the state office to assist counties in improving the ways they serve children and their families.